

A

L E T T E R,

&c.

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A LETTER

TO THE REV. THE

DEAN AND CHAPTER OF WESTMINSTER,

ON THE

INTENDED ALTERATIONS IN THE INTERIOR

OF

Westminster Abbey.

BY

A CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

LONDON:

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ERRATUM.

The friend to whose kindness I am indebted for the Plan, has drawn the stalls *in front* of the piers, instead of *between* them, as suggested in p. 12.

SECRET
10/11/55

A
L E T T E R,
&c.

VERY REVEREND AND REVEREND SIRS,—

THE expectation that some alteration would be made in the arrangement of that portion of Westminster Abbey which is set apart for the performance of Divine Service, has been so general and so extensively diffused, and the subject is one of such universal interest, as to render it almost unnecessary to apologize for occupying your attention by this letter.

The public press has, at different times, given notice that some plan for increasing the number of sittings, and for improving the appearance of the present choir of the church, has been under your consideration; and the interest with which these notices have been read, and the earnestness with which they have been discussed, have evinced the anxiety which is felt on the subject, not only by

those who take especial interest in ecclesiastical architecture, but more or less by all classes of persons.

The preservation in its integrity of so important a national monument as Westminster Abbey, must, indeed, interest every Englishman; and the hope that the services of the Church, there performed in all their excellence, may be made available to a larger number of persons, must be earnestly felt by every sincere member of the Church of England.

It is generally stated that the present arrangement of the choir is quite inadequate to afford accommodation to the large congregations which throng the church, and that, consequently, you have resolved to provide additional room for the worshippers. It is certain that many now are unable to obtain admittance to the church at service-time,—that of those who do, a large proportion are obliged to stand during the whole service, and are thereby unable to attend to the service with that devotion and reverence which a less crowded space would admit of; and there is little doubt that if accommodation were provided for a much larger number the congregations would much increase; for there is good hope that as the mass of the people more fully realize the system and excellence of our Church, the beauty of the ancient cathedral service will be more extensively appreciated, and that its celebration will be attended by larger numbers, and more frequently. The constant increase in both the daily and weekly

congregations in our cathedrals during the last few years, gives promise that they will become still more numerous.

The plan which is said to have been proposed for your approval is, that the screens which now enclose the choir from the transepts should be removed, that the worshippers should be admitted to the transepts as well as to the present choir, and that the stalls and other fittings of the church should remain as at present.

The intelligence that such were the means by which it was proposed to carry out the great object of providing additional room, has been received with very great concern by all those who feel any interest in church architecture, or in the ecclesiastical arrangement of churches.

It is proposed in the following pages to state concisely the objections which exist to this plan; and then to suggest a means of carrying out the object in view far more effectually.

1. To open the choir to the transepts is contrary to all ecclesiastical precedent; for though in the various cathedrals of this country and of the continent the situation and arrangement of the choir differ materially, I do not know of any instance in which it is not screened off from the transepts. In some churches the choir is confined to the space east of the transepts; in others it embraces the centre of the cross of the transepts; while in others (as at Westminster) it extends considerably west of them.

Yet in all some distinct separation exists between the choir and the transepts, or side aisles. The material, indeed, and arrangement of the enclosing screens differ: in some (as at Westminster at present) they are of wood; in others, of stone pierced; and in some foreign churches modern screens of iron-work have been substituted for the more antient ones. Yet in every case some screen or partition separating the choir from the transepts has been preserved; and I believe it may be asserted that there is no precedent for throwing open the transepts. To do so, indeed, seems to violate the great ecclesiastical principle which kept the people in front of and within sight of the altar, where, as we know, most of the services of the early Church were performed.

2. Those in the transepts, who are at all removed from the line of the present choir, will be quite unable to see the clergyman, either during the prayers, the lessons, or the communion service. A glance at the annexed plan will at once show this, and make it evident that a person standing at all far back in the transepts, will be quite unable to obtain a view of the place (near the second pier from the transept) whence the prayers and lessons are now read, or of the altar. Now without attaching undue importance to the congregation seeing the officiating minister, still it cannot be denied that the being within sight of the clergyman tends to fix the attention to the prayers which he says, or the Scripture which he reads; and,

I think, that there is little doubt that the being removed altogether from the view of the clergy would tend to render some among the congregation less attentive and less reverent. It seems, in fact, too much like having the *worshippers* in the choir, and the *listeners* (for many of them would be nothing else, being quite out of sight of the clergy and choir) in the transepts.

3. One cannot help feeling strongly, that the principle that the necessity of providing for the accommodation of the congregation sanctions the violation of ecclesiastical precedent and universal custom, is a most dangerous one to admit in the present day: it may carry us farther than we contemplate. If ancient ecclesiastical usage is to be set aside to provide room for a few additional worshippers, there seems no reason why other matters of greater consequence are not to be given up, until not merely the arrangement of our churches, but the services celebrated in them are to be sacrificed to the convenience of the congregations¹, or the necessity of the times. But, indeed, here no such necessity

¹ The cathedral of St. Patrick, in Dublin, affords a sad instance of this; in which church, it is stated, the communion-table is removed, and the area within the altar-rails filled up with seats to accommodate the congregation on Sunday afternoon. Such profanity as this (I believe) would not be tolerated in this country; but it may be fairly adduced as an instance in which an undue anxiety to provide accommodation for the public at the expense of ecclesiastical order and custom, has led to extreme and lamentable results.

exists ; for I shall presently prove that a larger number can be accommodated more conveniently by adhering to ancient ecclesiastical models and to the universal custom of the Church of England.

4. And this almost anticipates the mention of the last objection which seems to occur to the proposed plan of opening the transepts ; i. e. that after all, the additional room thereby provided may not be sufficient for the increased number of persons who, it may be hoped and reasonably expected, will attend the services at Westminster-Abbey, as soon as it is generally known that a considerable addition is made to the room at present appropriated to the public.

It seems most desirable that any plan now fixed on should be such as will provide so great an amount of space, as may suffice, not only for present but for increasing congregations ; and that, therefore, no plan should be adopted which may render future alterations and changes in the church necessary.

But it may be said, that it is useless to raise objections to the present plan of opening the transepts to the choir, unless some other suggestion be made by which the same end can be accomplished without incurring any of these objections. In this view the following suggestions are most humbly submitted :—

If, instead of opening the transepts, the NAVE were opened for the use of worshippers, ecclesiastical precedent would be strictly adhered to, the congregation would be accommodated with far greater convenience to themselves, and a much larger number could be

admitted to the services of the Church. To effect this, I venture to suggest that the present screen at the west-end of the choir should be removed, that the organ should be placed (as at Winchester) on the north side of the church, that the stalls should be carried more towards the east, and that the whole space of the nave, extending from the tower or cross of the transepts to the west door, should be fitted with open seats for the accommodation of worshippers. I think no one will doubt that if this plan be feasible (as I hope to show it is), it will render the appearance of the church yet more majestic and beautiful than it is at present: it is, indeed, impossible to fully realize the grandeur of the *coup d'œil* from the nave to the altar, or the exquisite beauty of the long line of pillars and aisles that would then be disclosed, unbroken by the organ, or the present screen and heavy wood-work which sustains it.

It has been ascertained by experiment, that if the stalls extended only from the present eastern piers of the tower and transept cross to the western piers of the same, there would be ample room for thirteen stalls, thereby providing accommodation for seven clergy² on each side, besides six stalls for lay-singers

² This, it is supposed, will be a sufficient number of stalls to accommodate the future establishment of the Church, reduced under the Ecclesiastical Duties and Revenues Act to 1 Dean, 6 Canons, 6 Minor Canons, 2 Masters of Westminster School,—in all 15 Clergy.

on each side, as at present. If the line of the stalls were carried from centre to centre of the piers (as in Henry VII.'s Chapel, and in many cathedrals), the return of the dean and sub-dean's stalls would not be so great as to project to any considerable extent beyond the pier; and if the choir were divided from the nave by a light openwork screen, the view from every part of the church to the altar would be uninterrupted; i. e. every single person present at Divine service would command a view of the clergyman during the whole of the prayers, lessons, communion service, and sermon. In order to effect this, it would be necessary to remove the organ from its present position; and it is suggested, that it might be placed in the arch (B) of the west aisle of the north transept. No objection seems to exist to its being placed there, as the space behind it being open to the transept, no ill effect can be anticipated to the sound of the instrument; and, indeed, it is traditionally stated to have been anciently on the north side of the church of Westminster, as it was generally (in former times) in English churches.

The length of the nave, from the cross of the transepts to the west door, is 236 feet. If open seats were placed along this space, leaving a passage of four feet up the centre, at a distance of 2ft. 6ins. from each other, ample accommodation would be provided for 1550 persons, besides those who might be accommodated within the choir: if, indeed, the

public generally were still admitted to the choir and up to the altar-rails,—a practice one can hardly fail to regret³, as tending to irreverence, and to break down the notion the church has so carefully endeavoured to keep up, that the chancel should be set apart and kept free from a crowd except during the celebration of the Holy Communion. And in this instance the treading of the congregation on the beautiful mosaic pavement which decorates this portion of the choir is doing serious and irretrievable injury to that exquisite work of ancient art, even though it is kept carefully matted up, and so quite hidden from view; whereas, if the people were not admitted within the railing, the pavement might be shewn, and this part of the church kept free from seats and benches. However, if to the number in the nave, all those who could be accommodated in the choir were added, there is no doubt that ample room could be provided for 1700 persons—room, that is, to kneel⁴ and to sit—with full opportunity of seeing, and it is believed of hearing the whole service.

On the other hand, the length of the two tran-

³ It might be advisable to keep the space within the choir for the Westminster Scholars, who would then be altogether separate from the congregation.

⁴ The open seats at Westminster Abbey are now so closely crowded together, that it is impossible for those in them to kneel down; and it is almost impracticable to do so in the square pews, at least if they are at all full.

septs, from the present screens to the north and south extremities (added together), is about 165 feet ; and if this were fitted with seats from the present screens quite to the walls (which would be impracticable), it would provide room for no more than 800 persons additional, of whom a very large proportion (at least half) would be utterly unable to see the clergyman during the service, and would be, in fact, cut off from the worshippers in the choir, almost as much as if they were in a separate building. Besides, the number and size of the monuments in the transepts would interfere seriously with any plan for seating the worshippers in them.

Or to state the relative advantages of the two plans in the most concise shape :—

If the nave were opened and fitted with open sittings, it would contain nearly 1300 persons ; or even should it be thought unadvisable to extend the seats quite to the west end, if those open sittings were to extend along five-sixths of its length, accommodation would be provided for about 1300 persons⁵ ; to which may be added between 70 and 80 who might be accommodated within the choir, making altogether nearly 1400, each of whom would

⁵ To prove how much greater an amount of accommodation might be provided by the proposed plan, it may suffice to state that, at present, the open seats from the transept cross to the west end of the choir, contain 102 persons in a very crowded and inconvenient manner ; were the plan I suggest adopted, the same space would conveniently accommodate 342 persons.

be able to see the clergyman during the whole of Divine Service.

On the other hand, by opening the transepts room cannot be provided for more than 500 persons, allowing for the space taken up by monuments, and which must necessarily be allotted for passages between the seats; which being added to 282, the number for whom sittings are provided in the present choir (outside the railings), gives 782 as the whole number who can be accommodated by that plan; of whom, let it be carefully remembered, about one-half will be unable to see the clergyman during the service.

It is thus apparent, that besides all other considerations (as the increased convenience of the congregation, and improved appearance of the church), the plan of opening the nave will provide accommodatoin for (at least) 618 persons more than that of throwing the transepts open to the choir.

I have not to either of these calculations added the number accommodated in the stalls and the seats below them, because that will remain nearly as at present in each plan: they will probably continue to be occupied, almost exclusively, by the members on the foundation of the church and college. Nor have I taken into account the number (about 150) contained within the railing near the altar, because no increase of accommodation is anticipated by either plan in that part of the church.

The only very strong objection to be anticipated to the proposal of opening the nave is, the fear that much of the service would be inaudible to those near the west-end. But I believe such a fear is groundless. It seems generally admitted, that those parts of the service which are *chanted* by the clergymen can be distinctly heard at a very considerable distance; and where (as in our Church) the attendants on Divine Service are all familiar with the words of the prayers, and mostly provided with prayer-books, we know that the ear and attention are so prepared for the words, that few are lost even when recited in a tone which would make it difficult to distinguish less well known words. The *musical* part of the service, i. e. that performed by the choir and accompanied by the organ, is distinctly audible from every part of the abbey; and, in fact, its effect is, in many instances, far greater when heard at a distance, than within the limits of the present choir. The lessons, too, if distinctly read, would be clearly heard quite down the nave, and more especially if they were read, as in most cathedrals, from an eagle (C) facing the west (as indeed the rubric seems to contemplate), which might be placed near the west-end of the choir. Even the service at the altar, which, one must confess, would be that which there is most doubt of hearing distinctly from the nave, would, I have little doubt, be quite audible if the present mass of screen-work and wood-work were removed. A large portion, too, of this service is sung by the

choir, and would therefore be distinctly heard over all the church, and that would assist the attention, and enable the more distant worshippers to follow the clergyman at the altar. And as it is suggested that the pulpit (A) should remain nearly in its present position, which will then be at the junction of the choir and nave, there is no doubt that the preacher would be heard distinctly in every part of the church ; more distinctly, indeed, perhaps, than he is now, surrounded by the wooden screen and stall-work. In fact, it seems impossible quite to estimate the power the voice would have if these obstacles, which now so much hamper it, were removed ; and moreover, as the people would be then more equally spread over the whole church, it is probable that a large congregation would not have the effect of deadening the sound of the voice, as they have at present, when crowded together *en masse* round the officiating clergyman.

I think that it will at once be admitted, that as a matter of taste, and as far as it regards the appearance of the church, the plan I have ventured to suggest, is very far preferable to that of opening the transepts to the choir ; if the open seats in the nave were kept low, and made of the most simple and unpretending character, they would by no means interfere with the appearance or beauty of the church ; and when compared with the immense height, and with the spaciousness of the nave, would not produce any disagreeable effect ; particularly, if as I

have suggested, a passage were left free from the west door to the altar. And in fact (as I have before observed), the effect of the whole area of the church laid open from the altar screen to the west door, would certainly be more magnificent than any thing now existing in this, or (perhaps) in any other country.

I do not anticipate that any objection will arise to this plan, on the ground that if the public be unreservedly admitted to the nave, injury or damage to the monuments it contains may be apprehended. I have no feeling of this kind, and on the contrary, I verily believe, that if the people are admitted to the nave for the purposes of Divine Worship, it will give a kind of sacredness to that part of the church, which it does not possess in the minds of the people while it is, as now, quite screened off, and never used for sacred purposes at all; and that the feeling of solemnity, and the realizing it to be an integral part of the church, and so appropriated to the service of God, will tend to make people respect its sanctity, not only during the time of Divine Service, but at other times when they may be admitted, as they now are, to view the monuments.

And this plan possesses this further advantage, that it is in perfect accordance with ecclesiastical precedents. It is, indeed, only applying to a large church, and a numerous congregation, and on a larger scale, the almost universal arrangement of our parish churches, in which the prayers are read

at the entrance to the chancel, while the great body of the congregation occupy the nave; and this arrangement itself is derived from that of the Primitive Church, in which the body of the people were admitted to the *ναὸς* or nave, while the service (or the greater part of it) was performed by the clergy within the *βῆμα* or chancel⁶. And any one who has entered any of the great churches on the Continent, will at once admit, that the other branches of the Church have kept up that ancient ecclesiastical arrangement.

Some part of it, too, is even now retained in a few of our great churches, as at Ely cathedral, and at Christ Church cathedral, and St. Mary's, Oxford, where sermons are preached in the nave.

I have thus ventured to lay before you a plan, by which a much larger number of persons may be conveniently admitted to Divine Service; by which the beauty of the church will be much increased; and to carry out which, the ecclesiastical arrangement and ancient usage of our Church need not be violated, but rather a return will be made to the Primitive and original disposition of the church.

My intention has been, to endeavour to point out to you a means, whereby the great object you have in view, the opening the church to increased congregations, may best be effected. One must indeed feel

⁶ See this proved in the Dean of Exeter's interesting and instructive pamphlet, "On the interior arrangement of churches," p. 11, 12.

thankful to you for thus proposing to extend the accommodation, and to render the services of the Church available to a larger number of persons.

The improvements, which have already taken place in the manner in which those services are performed, give the best assurance that your desire is to render the Abbey (as it ought to be), in ritual and arrangement the most perfect, as it is in architecture the most beautiful, of English churches.

And it would, indeed, be a matter of national regret, that a plan should now be carried into effect which would alter the antient ecclesiastical arrangements, which have been preserved uninjured, even through the lukewarmness and carelessness of the last ⁷, and the destructiveness of the preceding century.

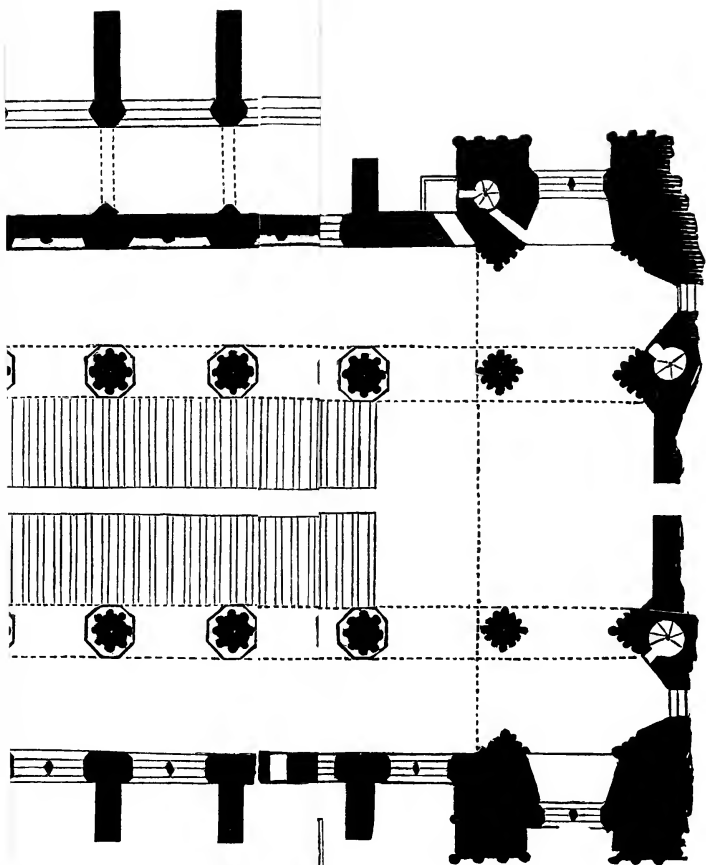
I have the honour to be, with great respect,

Your most obedient servant,

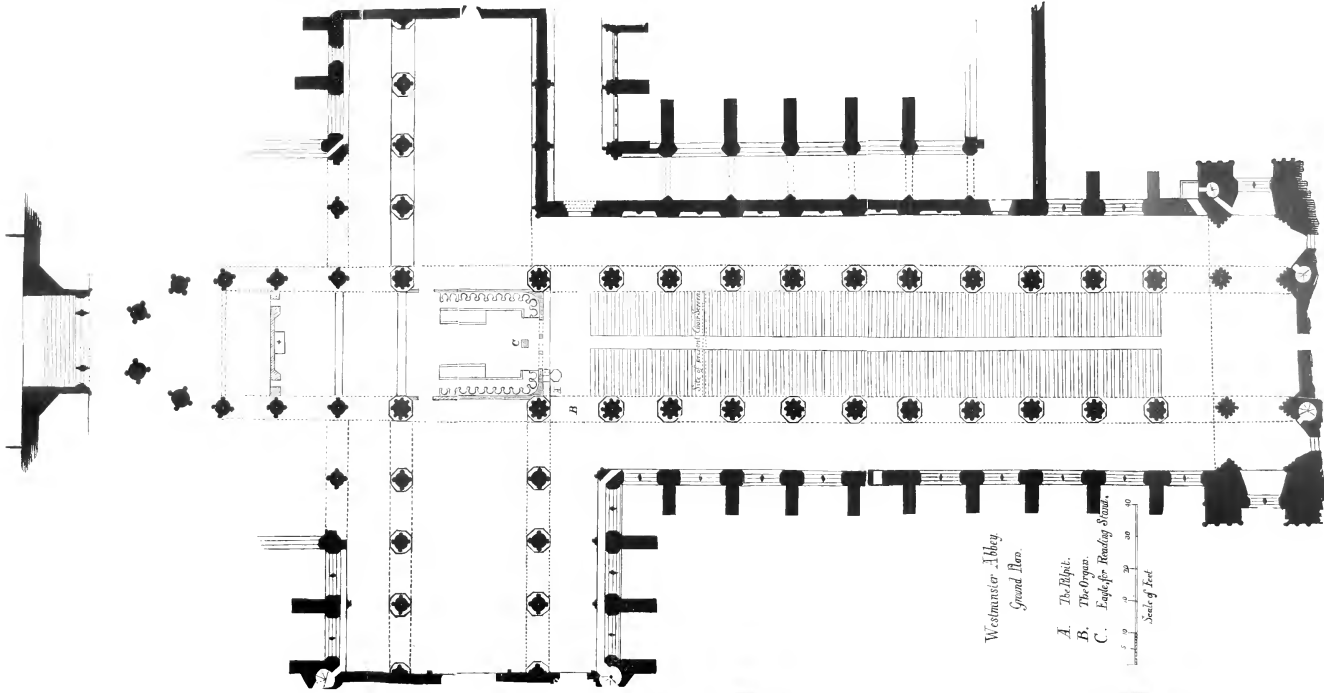
A CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

⁷ The date of the wood-work, and present arrangement of the choir, is about 1775.

THE END.



Scale of Feet



Westminster Abbey
Ground Plan.

- A. The Pilgr.
B. The Organ.
C. Eagle for Reading Stand.

Scale of Feet
0 10 20 30 40

